Adamant Young Man
April 17, 2011
Palm Sunday

John Buchanan, Pastor
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Psalm 118:19–29
Matthew 21:1–11

"The whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"
Matthew 21:10 (NRSV)

A young man, adamant in his commitment, walks the road of possibility to the end without self-pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he has chosen—even sacrificing affection and fellowship when the others are unwilling to follow him—into a new fellowship.

Dag Hammarskjöld
Markings

We are glad that once Jesus was received with honor, that once men and women and children shouted the startling idea that he was their true king. And we know, O God—because we have seen it in our world—how hopeful faith can turn to bitterness and doubt and finally violence. So as we begin once again a holy journey to the cross, silence in us any voice but yours; give us quiet moments to ponder the gift of your love, your amazing grace, in Jesus Christ our strong and brave Lord and King. Amen.

What is there not to love about Palm Sunday? A church full of people all morning long; the children processing down the aisle, more every year, coming in waves, an eloquent reminder of a surprising reality: we have families, we have children, lots of children. We baptize 130 babies every year, and before you know it those babies are toddlers and kindergartners and first graders and dressing up and walking down the aisle on Palm Sunday morning.

Can you imagine the logistics and choreography that have to happen to get all those children and parents in line in a church that just demolished its education building in order to build a new building with classrooms and facilities for all the children but which, at the moment, is now so crowded it is almost impossible to

move from here to there? Somehow Donna Gray and her colleagues got it done—a truly amazing feat.

It is a cardinal rule of homiletics that the preacher should be very careful about using his or her family for sermon illustrations. So I won't do it this morning, but maybe you didn't notice that a few of those beautiful little ones were my grandchildren. I just thought I'd mention it.

This day is a reminder of who we are and what kind of church Fourth Presbyterian Church has become and why Project Second Century is so important for our future. The new building that will rise immediately west of here will provide space for all those children and much, much more: new facilities for our outreach mission programs, well-equipped rooms for all the groups that meet here. There will be a 350-seat chapel and a dining room and kitchen and a beautiful, large gathering space for receptions and coffee after worship. And aesthetically it will be a striking complement to this wonderful 100-year-old Gothic building.

You have heard about the matching grant by two faithful members, Ken and Anne Griffin, to make the project possible. Money pledged or given up to Easter Sunday will be matched, dollar-for-dollar, up to $5.5 million. The financing for this ambitious project began with $16.5 million dollars saved from Project Light. Many of you made very generous gifts to that enterprise and I continue to be grateful to you for a solid foundation from which to launch Project Second Century. We wouldn't be where we are this morning apart from that. And now we are approaching the $5.5 million goal for the matching grant, a wonderful accomplishment. I am confident that we will not only reach the goal but exceed it.

My fondest hope is that every member and friend will pledge or give something to P2C—not only for financial reasons, but even more importantly so that as many of our people as possible literally have an ownership stake in the new building and the future of Fourth Presbyterian Church, which the new building represents. It will be our building, your building, in the deepest sense God's building, to use for the glory of God and the furthering of God's kingdom on earth.

If you made a pledge or gift, thank you.

If you have not, this Palm Sunday morning is a great day to do it—or any day this week up to and including Easter Sunday.

. . .

It is the pivotal event in the remarkable three-year ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus decided to come to Jerusalem at the worst possible time. Most of his life was spent in Galilee, seventy miles north of the capital city. Galilee was rural, rolling hills, small villages; Nazareth, where he grew up; Capernaum, where he lived as an adult; the large lake called the Sea of Galilee, which provided food and work for fisherman. The occupying Romans and the temple leaders were much less of a presence in Galilee. Life in Galilee was pleasant, comfortable, and mostly safe.

Once a year, at Passover, thousands of pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem. Historians say that it might have been 250,000. It was, for many, a once-in-a-lifetime trip to the City of David, the heart of their history and culture, and to the temple, rebuilt by Solomon, David's son, and the spiritual center of their religion. Passover was and is a freedom celebration that remembers and reenacts the nation's liberation from slavery in Egypt, and so it was a time of intense patriotism, amplified by the fact that they were not free but under the domination of another foreign power, Rome. It was so volatile, with all those people and passionate patriotism in the air and the hope that God would intervene by sending a Messiah to lead the people to freedom again, that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, whose headquarters were in Caesarea, on the coast, moved his headquarters to Jerusalem for the Passover and brought a substantial contingent of troops along to keep the peace, to watch for signs of a dangerous uprising.

Three years into his public ministry, the Bible says, Jesus "set his face steadfastly toward Jerusalem." His disciples knew the risks and advised him not to go and then followed, fearfully, as he set out, south toward the city. A few miles outside of Jerusalem, he ordered them to procure a donkey and a colt and bring them to him. They began to understand. Every one of them knew the words of the book of the prophet Zechariah; it was everyone's favorite:

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion;
> shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem.
> Lo, your king comes to you:
> triumphant and victorious is he,
> humble and riding on a donkey,
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
> (Zechariah 9:9)

And so when the crowds of pilgrims saw him riding through the city gates in the very way the prophet had said their king would come, they erupted in joy and hope and high expectancy. The hour had finally come. God had sent his messiah, his son, the Son of David to set them free. So they tore branches from trees and ripped the cloaks from their backs and laid them in front of him—a modest, royal carpet—and they shouted, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" which means "save us."

The trouble with the arrival in the capital city of a new king is that there already is a king. His name is Herod. He is allowed to remain king because he is an expert at accommodating the Romans, the real power and authority. Herod, known still for his ambitious building projects, was both feared and loathed by his people. He, above everyone else, was understandably nervous at any outbreak of patriotic fervor, especially one that looked like a direct challenge to his own authority. It has happened since the beginning of time: when people express displeasure with the governing authorities by protesting, the authorities may put up with it for a while, but then suppress it, ruthlessly if necessary. Mubarak's thugs attacked and killed protestors in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Protestors were and are arrested, tortured, and shot in Libya. Syria is also killing people protesting government policies. Don't try protesting the government in Iran or Cuba or North Korea.

Herod knew what Zechariah had said about the arrival of the new king. My guess is that as soon as he heard about the disturbance inside one of the city gates—Jesus of Nazareth on a donkey, the frenzied crowd, the palm branches and hosannas—he sent word to Pontius Pilate, the governor, that trouble appeared to be brewing and the troops should be on alert. And so for four days of Holy Week, Jesus was hounded, challenged, accused, arrested on trumped-up charges, tried in the middle of the night by a kangaroo court, and the next day, Friday, appeared before Pilate, with a crowd no longer waving palm branches or shouting "Hosanna" but shouting "Away with him! Crucify him! Crucify him!" The Romans finally took matters into their hands and carried out the execution. It only took five days.

Frances Taylor Gench, in her book *Encounters with Jesus,* says the Palm Sunday parade we are remembering today stands at the intersection of religion and politics.

We wish he hadn't come and so stirred the city, the government, but he did, and it has been difficult—if not impossible—ever after to claim that religion and politics ought to be separate.

After all, Jesus went out of his way to make a statement by the way he entered the city, a statement that got the immediate attention of the authorities. He certainly knew it would. If he believed religion is private, separate from the world, he would have stayed in Galilee.

Politics is the place where religious values are expressed: not just in the temple, in the church, but in the streets of the city, the marketplace, boardroom, and city council, courts, legislature, and congress.

Politics is where the Judeo-Christian doctrine that every human being is created in the image of God is expressed in provisions for equal rights, equal protection,

equal treatment. Politics is where Judeo-Christian concern for the weak and most vulnerable is expressed in programs to care for them.

Every government is currently engaged in a conversation about how to pay for it. A city or state or federal budget is more than a fiscal instrument; it is a moral-ethical document, an expression of a people's central values. It is not a partisan issue that budgets need to be balanced and deficits addressed; that too is a moral issue.

But so is caring for the most vulnerable—the children, the elderly, the poor.

It is also a moral-values matter how revenue is raised. Do we all share the responsibility, or are some favored and bear less of the burden percentagewise than the rest of us? Christian faith has many implications: personal, ethical, social, economic, political—because on this day Jesus rode in to the capital city and claimed to be a king.

Three questions: Why did he come to Jerusalem? Is God in this story? And, the question the crowd asked that day, Who is he? Why Jerusalem?

My first church was in northwestern Indiana, about thirty miles from here. I knew people in my congregation who had never been to Chicago or had come once and were so overwhelmed and frightened that they never came back. Things can happen to you in the city. You can get lost. You can get pushed and shoved on the sidewalk. You can have your wallet lifted on the "L." You can be shouted at by the traffic cop. You can lose your car in the underground parking garage. It's noisy and dirty; there are men on every corner asking for your money, most of which is gone because everything costs so much.

Jesus knew it was dangerous. He came to the city because he had to—had to be who he was, to teach what he taught, and live the values that were central to him, not only in the relative safety of Galilee but Jerusalem, the capital, the living, breathing center of his people's history and culture and life. It would have been so easy to stay away.

I have been haunted and inspired by the words of Dag Hammarskjöld, about the event, ever since I read them fifty years ago. Hammarskjöld was Secretary General of the United Nations, who died on a peace mission in Africa when his plane went down. He was a Christian, but few knew it at the time. His personal journal notes were published, after his death, under the title *Markings:*

> A young man, adamant in his committed life . . . alone as he confronted his final destiny. If God required anything from him, he would not fail. Only recently, he thought, had he begun to see more clearly, and to realize that the road of possibility might lead to the cross. He knew, though, that he had to follow it,

> still uncertain as to whether he was indeed “the one who shall bring it to pass,” but certain only that the answer could only be learned by following the road to the end.
>
> A young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility to the end without self pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he has chosen. (*Markings,* pp.68–69)

I have loved those words for fifty years for their insight into the internal dynamics of this day—a young man who must be true to himself; who faces his own fears and uncertainties, the risk of failure; who summons the courage to walk into the face of opposition and threat and conflict and danger; a man whose integrity will not allow him to do anything other than what he did.

That is why he comes. It is the very essence of Christianity that God is to be found in this story and every human story, including and particularly stories of suffering. To the age-old question, “Where is God in the midst of earthquake, flood, holocaust, plane crash, terrorist attack; the malignancy, the stroke; at the end of a simple, pleasant evening with friends the random accident that claims the life of a dear woman who overcame one incredible challenge after another all her life long —where is God when a good, honest and brave young man who was guilty of nothing other than loving everyone steadfastly and unconditionally was nailed to a cross and left to die alone, abandoned between two criminals?”

To that question asked in every age, the answer of Palm Sunday is there, in the midst of the terrible drama, and here, when you and I encounter suffering of any kind. Because Jesus came to the city, you can count on God to be present, to be your companion, your support, your strength, and when the time comes to meet head-on sickness, debilitation, pain, death itself, God is there with you. God assumes your suffering. God weeps when you weep.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, as a seventeen-year-old conscript in the German army, was caught in the Allied bombing of his hometown of Hamburg in which 40,000 civilians died, and he wondered, where is God in this? Later, in a British POW camp he was shown pictures of concentration camps in which his countrymen were gassing and burning millions of Jews and again he wondered where God was.

Moltmann remembers the day when he made the connection between the innocent suffering of Jewish men, women, and children and German civilians with the cross and the suffering of Jesus Christ—the suffering of God in Christ.

He asked, “Is God the transcendent and untouched stage manager of the theater of this violent world, or is God in Christ the central engaged figure in this world’s

tragedy?" Out of his own experience Moltmann concluded that in Jesus Christ, God enters fully into human life, enters and experiences human suffering, weeps beside and with us, and holds us up with loving arms when we are falling (*The Passion for God: The Crucified God Yesterday and Today*).

I have never had a one-time cathartic conversion to Christian faith. Rather it has been my experience that coming to faith is a process that began long ago, with my baptism as an infant, and continues every day, right up to and including the present. The critical point for me, theologically, intellectually, spiritually, was when I finally understood this: that in Jesus Christ God experiences everything it means to be human, to be you and me; that in Jesus Christ, God knows even what it means to doubt and despair, when from the cross Jesus himself cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God himself knows and understands and experiences the worst moments you and I will ever experience. The turning point for me was when I understood and committed myself to believe and live the truth, bigger than my capacity fully to understand it, that God is with us, with you and me, on this journey, every single day of it, right up to the last day and beyond.

And that is my answer to the third question the crowd asked on Palm Sunday: Who is this? He is Lord and Christ. God's only son. Not only the best man who ever lived, mentor, model, hero , he is God among us, God living our lives, God dying our death, God who will bring life and love and laughter even out of death itself.

One of his most passionate and adamant followers, the late William Sloane Coffin put it like this:

> Though the sky on Palm Sunday was bright without a cloud, he knew the throne awaiting him was a cross. . . . Yet—and this is truly remarkable—he loved people when they were least lovable. . . .
>
> When I think of how he never lost his love for the perpetrators, . . . when I think of the supreme courage, the depth of tenderness and passionate anger Jesus displayed on this one day alone, I realize why Palm Sunday is so important.

Bill concluded,

> At the very least, it should make all of us want to be people for whom words such as courage, tenderness and passion carry resonance. ("The Eternal Rider," *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin*, vol. 1, p .528)

I love knowing that when the tumult ended, when he sat down in the temple, the children—who loved him, who trusted him, who perhaps understood him best—came to him and sang, "Hosanna to the Son of David."

And so, like children, let us come. Step out of the crowd. Follow him with throngs of believers. Follow him to his cross and to the bright dawn of Easter morning and beyond—all the days of your life.

Amen.